

What To Do with Friends at Midnight?

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[0 : 00] May we pray together. God our Father as we look and hear afresh your words, the words of Jesus in the Gospel.

And as we think of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East at this time of transition and change. We pray that we and they will hear your voice and be encouraged and strengthened in their faith and their witness.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder if we can switch to the presentation there. That would be helpful. And while we do that, can I say thank you so much for the opportunity to come and to share with you this morning.

We share links between the Anglican world and I bring greetings from the Diocese of Egypt to you in your ministry and indeed from All Saints Cathedral.

I now wear a complimentary hat working with a bunch of folks. You'll find them all in the middle here clustered around a little way from my Miko colleagues, please. Our brothers and sisters here, Richard and Margaret and Annette, are representing us here in Australia.

[1 : 21] You'll see their display outside. And we have Keith and we have our colleagues here from the States. And we've got a board meeting this week chaired by Anthony and his wife, Chris.

So we've got a good network of folks coming, others joining us. And if you remember us Monday to Wednesday, you might just remember us as we think globally, but as we're delighted to be here and do that thinking in Australia.

This is an interdenominational mission agency. And our priority is to encourage and equip our brothers and sisters, Middle East Christians, for their witness in the challenges that they face.

And this passage here, Luke 11, is a pretty good example of how they and we could see things. So here is the prayer that we're very familiar with.

What we call the Lord's Prayer, maybe we should call it the Followers Prayer. When Jesus' disciples come off the previous chapter, they've been out on the road, they've been involved on a mission trip, and they're processing what's happened and what they've been seeing.

[2 : 43] And they come to Jesus and they say, Lord, will you teach us to pray? And Jesus is delighted to respond.

Here is how he responds. First and foremost, when you come to pray, be sure that you come to God who is your Father.

Now, immediately, in a Muslim context, I'm treading on thin ice. Because our Muslim friends will never call God Father like this.

They cannot. It would be blasphemy to do that. Jesus is saying, come into the presence of the living God. Come and make your requests. We'll see them in a moment.

But come absolutely sure from the beginning that because of who Jesus is and what he has done on the cross, we are welcome in the presence of almighty living God.

- [3 : 47] And you may be sure where you stand with him. You cannot say that in Islam. And here they come.
- And here we come with them. Lord, may, Father, may your name be honoured. May your kingdom come. Lord, in other words, may everything that matters to you matter to us in our world.
- That's what we long for. That's what we ask. Jesus says God is Father. And the Father loves nothing more than that we come into his presence. And that we bring our requests to him.
- He loves to hear. And he loves to respond. May your name be honoured. May your kingdom come. May we have everything we need for every day.
- May your friends and ours and us when we lived in Egypt. We learned very quickly that it is a daily bread culture. You have to buy things every day for every day.
- [4 : 53] And that's not just because there are supermarkets. But stuff that's in the supermarkets today might not be there tomorrow. So grab it while you can. But because stuff is so fresh and so tasty.
- The bread and the vegetables and the fruit. But it doesn't last in the heat. And in the dust. So you shop light. And what you have today is delicious.
- Really delicious. Remember that echo in Exodus? God's people fed up with wandering around Sinai. Just eating this manna every day. Oh, please, can't we go back? Because the food was so good.
- So tasty. It's fine today. Delicious. Tomorrow, okay, maybe you'll get away with it. But after three days, well, you have to start again. It's not so good. Give us today, Lord, everything we need every day.
- Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually. We are declaring our dependence on God for every day together. And above all, we need to know forgiveness from God.
- [6 : 01] That we in turn may forgive others. This is the heart of the matter. This, if you like, is our greatest need. I'll come back to this theme in a little bit of time.
- But, Lord, forgive us that we may forgive others. And show us, Lord, the way forward. That's a pretty good prayer for us in different parts of the West.
- But it's an especially good prayer for our friends in the Middle East at the moment. As they've embarked on what will prove to be a long journey. As I said, don't hold your breath.
- As we see how the changes work their way through. They need to know what is God's way forward for their nations.
- Now, we know that well. And we use it frequently together. The followers prayer. But in the Middle East, there is always a question behind the question.
- [7 : 07] And here is the question that will come. Lord, teach us to pray. In other words, what they are asking behind that question is this.
- How may we approach God? Can we? And if so, how? Which is why Jesus introduces them to God the Father.
- As you've heard, I'm a father. I'm now a grandfather. The truth is, I've probably not been a very good father. I had the experience of my own father. And he had many strengths. But I can still remember his weak points in my life.
- We're all familiar with dysfunctional families. They say sometimes, don't they, that all families are a bit dysfunctional. Some more than others. Ours may be as well.
- And we're all aware of different experiences. But we all know what a good father should be. What a perfect father ought to be. And Jesus says, come into the Father's presence.

[8 : 11] For God longs to have you. Longs to hear you. Longs to respond to you. You may be sure of a welcome when you come into his presence.

You may approach him. And just to drive the point home. Jesus tells this fascinating story of the midnight visit.

Now, journeys in the Middle East. Sometimes they are on a timetable. But not always. And sometimes they run when the bus fills up. Or when the driver is ready.

Or when someone tells them. And of course that means they can arrive at any time. You don't know what you're going to meet on the road. Especially when you're away from the cities out in the desert.

And all kinds of traps lie in wait. And journeys can take any amount of time. And you get there when you get there. And that might mean at midnight.

[9 : 09] And the deal is this. That the people who welcome you. Must give you hospitality when you arrive. It's an obligation. We loved our time in Egypt.

But it is dirty. And dusty. And noisy. And full on. And it is a culture of obligation. And as foreigners, guess what? We didn't know what the obligations were.

Until we missed them. And then you're on the back foot all the time. Recovering the ground that you've just lost. I said sorry more times in nearly five years in Egypt.

Than I've ever said in the rest of my life. Put together. I made more cultural gaffes in that world. Than I've ever done. I remember one of my first experiences in Jordan.

Going to visit a head teacher. And she had a fascination for these amazing Bedouin dolls. They looked like skittles. And they were all around the top layer of her office. And I was just amazed.

[10 : 08] I said whoa. These are amazing. What's the story of these? Big mistake. If you admire something in Arabic. The holder of those things.

Must give you something of them. So suddenly everybody looked nervous. My friends who'd lived there for a while. Put their heads in their hands.

And there was a flurry of activity. And I came out with four of these great big skittles. I couldn't get them all on the plane. And a bunch of little ones which we have by our fireplace in Edinburgh now.

And now I only ever admire women's clothes. And people's houses. Because they can't give you those.

So you can make many mistakes. But here is the obligation. You see all these people have pitched up at midnight. The people in the middle have to feed them. Have to welcome them.

[11 : 09] Have to look after them. And the way they will do that is to give them a huge meal. And did you notice? They need three loaves of bread. And that's what they're short of. And that's because we often don't use knives and forks in some parts of the Middle East.

Especially in the country areas. We use bread. And you tear off a piece of bread. And you dip into what's in the middle of the table. And that's your cutlery. Okay. I have the food. But I don't have the means to serve it.

I'm stuck. So the person in the middle goes to the one who's sleeping. It's midnight. The family's all in bed. The doors are all locked. The television's off.

The day is done. Please will you help me? Because I'm caught in the middle. And as Jesus tells this story to Middle Eastern hearers.

He's really saying. Can you imagine this happening? And this is. You go to your friend. You knock them up. And they say.

- [12 : 06] I can't be bothered. I really. This is too inconvenient. It's far too late. You've missed the boat. The kids are sleeping. I don't want to wake them up.
- I can't do it. Jesus says. Can you imagine that happening? Well. I think. In the West. We would probably say. Yes. This is a cold calling world.
- Isn't it? Now. The calls always come to my wife. When I'm traveling. And. The last one. Was about. Some loan. That we apparently paid off. About five years ago.
- But because we had. Payment protection insurance. We can now make a claim. On the bank. That we pay back the loan. And now. The problem with that. Is we did actually. Pay a mortgage.
- Back. About five or six years ago. And so. She didn't know. If it was that. That they were talking about. And they gave her. Such a run around. And it's a scam. When we moved back.
- [13 : 05] From Egypt. To Scotland. Our house had been let out. And people were using it. And they kept it really well. But after a number of years. It needed freshening up. So we did a lot of work. And I thought.
- Ah. Maybe the boiler. Needs to be renewed. The central heating boiler. So I made an inquiry. On the web. Of one company. From that day.
- I had two. Or three calls. Every week. From people. I never knew. Offering me. All kinds of wonderful deals. On boilers. And insulation. And then later.
- They worked out. That the house is a certain age. And lots of people. Might be changing their windows. So now it's the windows. People coming. I'm saying. How do they know that? I never told them.
- So I would be very inclined. To put a notice up at the door. Saying. We don't do business. At the door. The equivalent. Of turning over. And going back to sleep.
- [14 : 02] Pulling the doors. Close. Keeping us alone. And keeping away. From all that. Maybe. Maybe. You feel. The same.
- But of course. The point of Jesus story. Is. You could not imagine that. In a Middle Eastern culture. Where the honor. Of the family.
- In the middle. Is at stake. I love the footnote. Of the translation. Of the Bible. That we read from. Because it catches that. Perfectly.
- For. To preserve. The good name. Of the person. Who. Is asking. You couldn't imagine.
- Somebody. Turning over. And ignoring the request. Because this person's good name. Is at stake. This person. Is in a difficult situation. And of course.
- [15 : 00] Jesus point. Is. He's talking about. The father. And you are welcome. In the father's presence. And someone comes. You're under pressure.
- You go for help. To the father. And he won't get up. Absolutely not. He'll make some. Lame excuse. About the kids waking up. Absolutely not.
- See this man. God. Is not like that. That's the way. The story works. You know. Lots of Jesus stories. Work the other way. They say.
- See this. God is like that. Only more so. But there's a couple in Luke. This one. And then later in Luke 18. Where the woman comes to the judge. Remember. And the judge can't be bothered. And she beats his door down.
- And pesters him. Until he thinks. Oh for goodness sake. I need to get this woman off my back. I'll do it. And the point is. God. Is not. Like that.
- [15 : 57] You may come. Into God's presence. For he is your father. And he loves nothing more. Than that you should come. And ask. Especially.

When you are in need. And yes. Because. Of this. Man's boldness. Persistence. Those are the old translations. No. Because of your situation.

Because of your predicament. Because of the honor. Of your family name. And the name of our community. We do not want to be known. As the people. Who did not give hospitality. That would be a terrible shame.

So I will get up. And I'll help you. And God. Is different from that. He will get up. From the beginning. He will not have to be knocked up.

You will not have to dig him. Out of his bed. So Jesus is teaching his friends. You see. That when they had a problem. Now they have an invitation. You are welcome.

[16 : 54] In the father's presence. And you are welcome to come. Asking. Seeking. Knocking. Because this.

Is for everyone. In one of the old languages. I gather that they. They set up the sentence like that. Ask. Everyone. Seek.

Everyone. Knock. Everyone. Anyone can do this. Ask. And anyone. Can be welcome. In the presence of God.

Through the person. And the work of Jesus Christ. And anyone. Can come. And ask. You are welcome. In the father's presence. And he sums it up.

As Jesus completes his story. That. Okay. You fathers. You make many mistakes. Actually. I could call you evil. But at least. Even you know.

[17 : 51] That God. Can be generous. How much more. How much more. Will God give. The Holy Spirit. If you like. The summary. Of everything.

We need. The person of God. Made available. To every believer. As real to us. As Jesus. Is to his disciples. In that one place. At that one time.

God delights. To give. His Holy Spirit. To those. Who ask. You see. There are two lines. In this story.

The main one. Of course. Is that Jesus. Is teaching his friends. About the nature. And the character. Of God. Which only he can reveal.

In all its fullness. But I think he's also. Showing us something else. And our friends. In the Middle East. Perhaps. Are on to this.

[18 : 48] You see. There in the middle. They've got all. Kinds of. Overwhelming. Going on. In their lives. At the moment.

Some countries. Are in the midst. Of revolutions. And long transitions. And in the Middle East. As things are now. It wasn't always the case.

But Christians. Are a minority. In Egypt. Roughly 10%. When you think of Egypt. Do the 90-10. Okay. 90% desert. 10% beautiful.

Water fed. Lush. Green. Fruitful ground. 90% Muslim. At the moment. 10% Christian. Of the Christians.

90%. Quite formal. Coptic. Just means Egyptian. 10%. The rest of us. 90-10. 90-10. Our friends.

[19 : 46] Are being overwhelmed. Because they're a minority. They're being overwhelmed. Because. Things are changing. They're being overwhelmed. Especially those.

Who are nearby. To Syria. First by Iraqi refugees. And now by the displaced people. From Syria. And we see many. Harrowing reports. Still. Of what is going on there.

That's not going to get fixed. Anytime soon. And our friends. In Jordan. And Lebanon. Particularly. In churches. Some large. Many small. Have all had to make a journey.

From honestly. Initial resentment. Who are just another wave of people. And we're supposed to respond to them. It's too hard. It's too difficult. It's difficult enough.

Living out our lives. As a minority group. And now all this is coming. You see our friends have been. Going through times of overwhelming. And it's like they're caught in the middle.

[20 : 42] And I think it's like they're coming to us. And they're saying. Will you stand with us? Will you join with us? Will you pray with us?

Will you bring suitable people. To work with us? Will you be with us? At a time like this? And it seems to me that.

Now is massively the time. For us. To demonstrate that. To our friends. That actually we will not stay sleeping. We will not make lame excuses.

Anyway the kids will go back to sleep. Even if they wake up for a bit. No. We will wake up. And we will hear. And we will respond. I think that's a secondary application.

Of this. Story. You see when we think of the Middle East. There are many people praying. Actually Egyptians there. In one of the so called cave churches.

[21 : 39] Where as many as 10,000 people. Can come together. And pray together. On any one occasion. You didn't know that did you? The largest Presbyterian church. In Cairo is 8,000 strong.

You didn't know that did you? And they've got 30 missionaries. All around the region. And a couple in Barcelona too. And others in North London. Appropriately named Joseph and Mary. And they have a book tent.

Up in one of those suburbs. Near Heathrow Airport. And they put up their tent. Put out their books. Wait for the rain. The Brits come in. And they share with them. About the gospel of Jesus. And when I say to them.

It's really difficult. To talk to English people. About Jesus Christ. These days. They don't want to know. They say rubbish. I say that's because you're Egyptians. You have this opportunity. And God is moving things around.

Here is a logo produced. By the Egyptian Bible Society. In recent months. It's a little campaign that they had. To encourage the Christians.

[22 : 37] And what you have in the middle. In this beautiful Arabic calligraphy. Is a symbol that looks a bit like the Al Jazeera news symbol. Doesn't it? But it's not. It's actually the words of Jesus.

The light of the world. Who gives us the responsibility. To carry his light. And to point people to him. You are the light of the world.

Now go to it. That was their message. And the Bible Society. They have over a hundred people working with them. In Egypt alone. And they're constantly praying. Constantly working.

On bits of scripture. What is ringing a bell here? Let's put this out into the crowds. Let's put this out amongst the demonstrations. Let's get God's word out there.

At this time. You see yes. Our friends have been through a very difficult time. Especially last summer. When in Egypt. Many many churches. Were burned. And damaged.

[23 : 34] Eighty I think. A couple of Bible bookshops destroyed. Many homes and businesses damaged. And some Christians lost their lives. In this outbreak of violence.

But here's what the Christian leaders said. In the face of that. On the right there is Pope Tawadros. Who is the leader. Of the majority Egyptian Christian community.

The ones who have been there. Since the beginning. Since the time of Jesus. And he puts it like this. If the destruction of these properties. Was the price Christians have to pay.

To get a free Egypt. Then that sacrifice is worthwhile. For a while. That's impressive isn't it? And he and Bishop Muneer. And others. Have been teaching.

The Christians. Those who did not run away and leave. But those who were staying. That now is the time. To pray and forgive. And that's the story.

[24 : 33] That I think our friends are a bit fed up. You might not have heard yet. Oh you've seen the violence. You've seen the demonstrations. That's what 24 hour media love to present. Really difficult to be a journalist.

In that world these days. They're under a lot of pressure. To get the latest story. The latest pictures. But a lot of the time. It's just the same story recycled. How many times. Do you say the same image.

While the conversation tracks through. And you get the impression. That everywhere. Is in meltdown. And difficulty. Well it's not. And the real story. Last summer.

Was that the Christians. Were enabled by God's spirit. Not to retaliate. In a tribal culture. Where it's very tempting to do that.

And sometimes even. To get your retaliation in first. They were given God's strength. To forgive. And to meet in their burned out churches.

[25 : 32] And to pray. And the leaders went further even. In the Middle East. Your whole identity as a Christian. Is tied up with church. And church building.

Because church building. Is your permission to exist. You're not supposed to meet. In homes. Or informally. And your building becomes your identity.

But here's what they said. The church is the people of God. Christ's body. Not the buildings in which we worship. In context.

Dynamite. Thus the church can never be destroyed. Our own bishop. Bishop Muneer. Pictured here.

Celebrating the 75th anniversary. Of All Saints Cathedral. In Cairo. With the present Archbishop of York. John Sentamu. Who's a Ugandan.

[26 : 26] And he wound the Egyptians up. During this celebration. By warning them. That Ugandans. Could turn the water off. At one point. Because they've got one of the Niles. Running through. Egyptians didn't really like that.

At all. They're really worried. About the Ethiopians. Who are going to build a big dam. As well. And they could turn the water off. And 9010. They could be in real trouble. If the water goes down.

But John Sentamu came. Because the first time. The cathedral was opened. In Cairo. It was the then Archbishop of York. William Temple. Who came. The one who became eventually.

The Archbishop of Canterbury. And so. They celebrate together. But here is Bishop Muneer's wisdom. At the moment. We have witnessed. Bloodshed. Vandalism.

Deliberate destruction. Of churches. And government buildings. Unemployment. Is at a record high. There's a lack of security. On the streets. The economy's in decline.

[27 : 22] Poverty is crushing. It always was. But it's more so than ever. For many. Yet. This. Is a time. Of gospel. Opportunity.

Many people are asking questions. And many people want to find out. About Christ. You see. In predominantly. Muslim cultures. Questioning.

Is disloyalty. You're not supposed to ask. But now. People are asking. Through the satellite channels.

They're responding. Through the internet ministries. They've got the chance to respond. You can do that. Without anybody knowing. Who you are. And where you are. But now. Actually. Face to face. We saw some of this.

Before we left. They didn't come to us. Because our Arabic. Wasn't good enough. But they went to the Arabic pastor. And they went. To the bishop. And they basically said. Something like this.

[28 : 17] If this is Islam. And what it produces. We don't buy it anymore. Will you tell us now. Your story. I think the cracks are showing. And I think the opportunity is there.

And our brothers and sisters. Are taking this pressure. As a time. Of gospel. Opportunity. So this is the time. For us. To share.

With them. As we reflect then. On how we might pray. Into this situation. Here's some wisdom. From brother Andrew.

You know him. From many trips. And visits. Giving out scripture. He has concluded this. That our friends. Who are under pressure. Say. Don't pray for us.

That's a surprise. But pray with us. If you pray for us. You may pray. The wrong things. You may pray for safety. You may pray for protection. You may pray for peace.

[29 : 13] We'd love those things. But actually. They're not the main line. Pray instead. That millions of people. Will respond to God's word. And find in Jesus.

What they so long for. In themselves. Pray. That when that happens. Our brothers and sisters. Will be faithful.

Even when the backlash comes. And even they say. If it costs us our lives. I think. We could pause. And pray.

Don't you. Let's do that. Lord Jesus. Thank you so much.

For this memorable story. That you told. So that we could know. That we are sure. Of a welcome. In the presence. Of father God. That we are free to come.

[30 : 07] And free to ask. Because we know. That he will hear. And he will respond. And we pray. Father God. That our friends. In the Middle East. And indeed. Those who are here.

Who come from Muslim backgrounds. May also discover this. For themselves. We pray. Meanwhile. For our brothers and sisters. That you will strengthen them.

As they embrace this time. As a time. Of gospel opportunity. And we pray these things. In Jesus name. Amen.

Amen.